

# Committee on Resources,

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

[forests](#) - - Rep. Scott McInnis, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6205 - - (202) 225-0691

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### Witness Statement

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#### Statement of Jason Robertson, American Whitewater's Access Director, for the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health on Permanent Extension of the Forest Service Recreation Fee Demonstration Program

(Tuesday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2001, at 3:00 PM in 1337 Longworth H.O.B.)

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##### *Summary:*

Outdoor recreationists and sportsmen believe that it is inappropriate to continue extending the Fee Demo program through the appropriations process. For that reason, the human-powered recreation community is encouraged by this subcommittee hearing. We support no more than a single one-year extension in the FY 2002 Interior Appropriations bill. This one-year extension will give the authorizing committees time to hold public hearings and judge the fate of this demonstration program. In a broad analysis:

- The recreation community would consider supporting certain user fees if there is a firm commitment to adequate public land funding via appropriations with an emphasis on restoration and maintenance.
- There is some support for entrance fees to National Parks and use fees at developed campground sites on public lands. In addition, there could be justification for charging fees at specific, high-use recreation areas. However, the community is not likely to support fees at these additional developed recreation sites without cautious evaluation and strong parameters (i.e. limiting use of funds to maintenance and projects directly benefiting recreation, and specifically excluding administration costs for planning and enforcement).
- There is broad opposition for fees for undeveloped recreation activities, such as trail use, backcountry hiking, kayaking and canoeing, and mountaineering.
- Fees will impact future outdoor recreation, as well as how recreation is managed on public lands. We are committed to working with Congress and the public land agencies to ensure that recreationists will continue

to enjoy quality, affordable, outdoor recreation opportunities on America's public lands.

*Statement:*

Good afternoon. Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor and a privilege to be invited by the majority to speak before the committee about permanent extension of the Forest Service Recreation Fee Demonstration Program.

I am Jason Robertson, Access Director for American Whitewater. I am speaking here on behalf of a broad cross section of America's human-powered recreation industry and sportsmen. I, personally, am a hiker, a camper, a boater, a kayaker, a canoer, an occasional fly fisherman. Fee Demo affects me on a personal as well as a professional level.

I would like to share a story with you that I prepared for our magazine, the *American Whitewater Journal*.

When I was 11 my grandmother invited my family home for Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, my beagle, Maggie, had just broken her leg and had to wear one of those satellite dishes so she would not lick her stitches. She looked pitiful, and we figured we could not leave her alone for the weekend.

Grandmother invited us to bring Maggie up to keep her company while she was cooking in the kitchen. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Well, Grandmother finished cooking the turkey, and placed it on the kitchen table to cool. We left the dog in the kitchen and went in the dining room to say grace.

A few minutes later we went back in the kitchen to slice the turkey and found that Maggie, even with that satellite dish hobbling her, had leapt up on the table and was gnawing on the turkey.

We learned that we could not tease the dog forever. You have to feed him, put him out, or tie him up.

Now, we thought leaving the dog in the kitchen with the turkey was a good idea. As we learned, without appropriate supervision, it was not ... and neither is Fee Demo.

When we, sportsmen, recreationists, and Congress joined together in 1996 to give the agencies permission to test the idea of collecting funds from the public, it also seemed like a good idea. Unfortunately, we started this program by locking the dog in the kitchen with the turkey and turning our back on her. We have given the Forest Service, Park Service, BLM, and Fish & Wildlife Service authority to collect funds without any real oversight, review, or evaluation.

To make matters worse, we have teased the agencies for three years with these arbitrary extensions of Fee Demo and lured them on with the promise of permanent Fee collection authority. It is little surprise to find that the agencies have gone to such extraordinary lengths to expand their fee collection programs after being teased with this test program for six years. Unfortunately, the agencies desire for funding has blinded them to the consequences of their actions. This hearing is the first step to remedying this unfortunate situation.

It is time to stop teasing the wildlife and recreation management agencies. We have to feed them with

adequate public funding, put them out of the fee collection business, or tie the scope of the fee collection authority and make them truly accountable to the recreating public that they serve.

Personally, I think Fee Demo is a failure. American Whitewater's membership and board agree with me. Therefore we dropped our support for the program in 1998 after observing that 20% to 25% of all Fee collection sites target river users, though boating represents less than 1% of Forest and Park visitation. In essence, we have found that boaters are subsidizing all other forest visitors through Fee Demo.

In July 2001, the human-powered recreation coalition of hikers, bikers, skiers, climbers, and boaters wrote the Senate Appropriators:

*The program has now been in demonstration phase since 1996. We believe that it is inappropriate to continue to extend the program through the appropriations process. If this issue is to move forward, an evaluation by the authorizing committees is necessary. For that reason, we strongly urge Interior conferees to support no more than a one-year extension in the FY 2002 Interior Appropriations bill. This one-year extension will give the authorizing committees time to hold public hearings and determine the fate of the program.*

As indicated, recreationists do not support the extension of Fee Demo without a complete and fair review. This program was implemented as a test, a demonstration, but there's been little oversight. In fact, the agencies have been tasked with reviewing their own successes or failures and have claimed that because many people pay the fees there is evidence of support for the program. The GAO has repeated the claims. The logic of this argument is flawed, and the fact that the public is obeying the law should not be confused with whether the public actually supports the law. It is essential for Congress to seriously evaluate both the negative and positive sides of this program.

It is my belief that the agencies, and the Forest Service in particular, don't need Fee Demo and don't need to charge Americans to visit their public lands. While the program has raised a few million dollars it has come at the expense of some core American values and compromised many of our basic principles. Can you imagine being ordered by your grandparents to pay \$5 to come in the house for Thanksgiving; or being commanded to pay \$5 to enter your church to worship? Making America's sportsmen pay for entry to the public lands that we own is no different.

Mandatory fees should be discouraged, and Congress should consider and encourage voluntary contribution programs.

American Whitewater manages property all over the country for recreation. We acquire some outright, lease some, and simply engage in partnerships in other locations.

Currently, we are partnering with Maryland's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to manage river access on the Youghioheny River in Garrett County. The DNR was tasked by the state with cost recovery for the site, which amounted to \$8000 a year. The DNR raised about \$1000 in the first year and less than \$400 in the second.

American Whitewater stepped in to prevent ticketing for violators and closure of the site. We provide toilets, changing rooms, and mow the grass at the site for less than \$300 a year with the help of volunteers. We also collect over \$1000 a year in donated funds at the site, which are set aside for future projects. We found that visitors will volunteer and provide funding if they detect a direct benefit from their contributions.

Now, American Whitewater is a small non-profit, so the logical question is whether the agencies can also use this model of funding maintenance and upkeep for recreation through volunteers and donations, rather than a mandatory fee system? The answer is yes.

Dave Cernicek is the Forest Service Backcountry and River Manager on the Snake River in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He opted out of Fee Demo and has managed to provide new toilets, fresh drinking water, improved parking, new river access, and even shaded park benches through a voluntary donation program called the Snake River Fund.

He will be the first to tell you that it is difficult and time consuming to manage volunteers and solicit donations. But he will also tell you that it is rewarding, that it has made the agency directly accountable to visitors, and that those visitors are getting the maintenance that they have asked for. As Ranger Cernicek has told me, "visitors vote with their dollars, and I aim to satisfy them."

In contrast, Fee Demo is not accountable to the public. The fees are often unfair. The agencies are unresponsive. And, recreationists and sportsmen are not getting the services that they desire or deserve.

During the course of the Fee Demonstration program, the outdoor community has learned that outdoor recreationists and sportsmen believe it is inappropriate to continue extending the Fee Demo program through the appropriations process. For that reason, the human-powered recreation community is encouraged by this subcommittee hearing. We support no more than a single one-year extension in the FY 2002 Interior Appropriations bill. This one-year extension will give the authorizing committees time to hold public hearings and judge the fate of this demonstration program. In a broad analysis:

- The recreation community would consider supporting certain user fees if there is a firm commitment to adequate public land funding via appropriations with an emphasis on restoration and maintenance.
- There is some support for entrance fees to National Parks and use fees at developed campground sites on public lands. In addition, there could be justification for charging fees at specific, high-use recreation areas. However, the community is not likely to support fees at these additional developed recreation sites without cautious evaluation and strong parameters (i.e. limiting use of funds to maintenance and projects benefiting recreation, and specifically excluding administration such as planning and enforcement).
- There is broad opposition for fees for undeveloped recreation activities, such as trail use, backcountry hiking, kayaking and canoeing, and mountaineering.

Fees will impact future outdoor recreation, as well as how recreation is managed on public lands. We are committed to working with Congress and the public land agencies to ensure that recreationists will continue to enjoy quality, affordable, outdoor recreation opportunities on America's public lands.

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